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Salemink, O.H.J.M.; DiGregorio, M.

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Living with the Dead: The politics of ritual and remembrance in contemporary Vietnam

Michael DiGregorio and Oscar Salemink

Since the inauguration in 1986 of the reforms known as *Đổi Mới*, ritual and religious practices have proliferated in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This renewed interest in religious and ritual practice has been the object of intensive scholarly interest both in Vietnam and outside, and has been interpreted in terms of revival (*phục hồi*), invention and politics of tradition. This collection of articles deals with this phenomenon of ritual revival in Vietnam as well but attempts to go beyond the – by now common – approaches that connect it with the emerging religious practice and political liberalisation, economic reform and the emerging market in the context of *Đổi Mới*. Instead, these papers explore in more depth the ritual dimensions of life from the central state down to the individual level.

Abandoning simplistic dichotomies between such categories as profane and sacred; this-worldly and other-worldly; entertainment and ritual; central and local; elite and folk; Buddhist, Taoist and folk religions; national and transnational, the papers in this collection set out to explore how these categories come together in real lives, both individually and collectively. Without losing sight of the politics and economics of religious and ritual experience, this collection of articles sets mundane practices in meaningful cosmologies that include other worlds. Indeed, a common thread in the papers is the basic assumption that much ritual practice in contemporary Vietnam attempts to create a connection – or a channel of communication – between this ‘yang’ world (*thế giới dương*) with the other ‘yin’ world (*thế giới âm*), and in that sense seeks to connect the living in this world with the dead – the ancestors, the spirits – in the other world. While recognising the truism that ‘traditional beliefs’ have become elements in constructions of meaning, values and certainties in post-*Đổi Mới* Vietnam,¹ the papers suggest that the existential, ontological, political and economic uncertainties in this life are ritually offset by a firm and widespread belief that the dead exert deep influence over the living, and by wavering and uncertain attempts to turn the dead into allies.

Reviving ritual and festival

The set of articles in this volume cannot offer a comprehensive overview of all the issues at hand. Rather, they focus on aspects of relations between the living and the dead through beliefs and rituals that take place at a variety of levels, from individual

Michael DiGregorio is a Program Officer with the Ford Foundation, Hanoi; Oscar Salemink is affiliated with the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU University Amsterdam.

¹ This is also brought out in Resolution No. V of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (passed in 1998), which seeks to ‘build an advanced culture imbued with national identity’.

experience to family and village and, by extension, to the imagined community of the nation as a whole. To say that these beliefs and rituals have become a major focus of study in Vietnam is, to say the least, an understatement. Beginning in Vietnam in the late 1970s, research on the revival of beliefs, ritual and festivals, following a period of suppression in the campaign toward secularisation and socialist construction, came as a surprise to many. Outside the country there is now a burgeoning literature on this phenomenon, and despite many common features, scholars have tended to stress different causal factors in their re-emergence. Hy Văn Lương, for example, pointed to a 'dialogic' widening space for religion and ritual action that corresponded with increasing wealth and a need for spiritual compensation for the economic insecurity inherent in the market.² John Kleinen drew attention to the rebirth of village prestige economies in which economic position was signalled through 'conspicuous consumption', including contributions to temple reconstruction and village rituals. This point was also noted by Trương Huyền Chi, who painted a vivid picture of the competition for prestige between and within villages, lineages, gender and age groups and individuals.³ At the same time, Kleinen, like Luong, pointed to the state's interest in the revitalisation of rituals as a means of political legitimisation. This latter issue is also taken up by Alexander Woodside in his reflection on the changing role of the state in Vietnamese society.⁴

Kirsten Endres also took up the political gauntlet, situating the revival of transformed ritual, village festivals and reconstructed ritual space in an official desire to promote traditional morality during a period of rapid social change. She referred to this effort, inscribed in guidelines for designation of ritual sites as places of historical significance, as 'the politics of ritual displacement'.⁵ In these same events and processes, Ngô Đức Thịnh saw as completely opposing a perspective as possible. Referring back to a line of reasoning initiated by the late Vietnamese ethnologist Nguyễn Từ Chi, Thịnh saw the restoration of ritual spaces and practices, including annual village festivals, as an attempt to recreate institutions of local self-governance.⁶ Through Thịnh's position

2 Hy Van Luong, 'The political economy of Vietnamese reforms: A microscopic view from two ceramic manufacturing centers', in *Re-inventing Vietnamese socialism*, ed. William S. Turley and Mark Selden (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 119–47; Luong, 'The Marxist state and the dialogic restructuring of culture in rural Vietnam', in *Indochina: Social and cultural change*, ed. David Elliot *et al.* (Claremont, CA: Claremont McKenna College Keck Center, 1994), pp. 79–114.

3 John Kleinen, *Facing the future, reviving the past: A study of social change in a northern Vietnamese village* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1999); Truong Huyen Chi, 'Changing processes of social reproduction in the northern Vietnamese countryside: An ethnographic study of Dong Vang village (Red River Delta)' (Ph. D. diss., University of Toronto, 2001).

4 Alexander Woodside, 'The struggle to rethink the Vietnamese state in the era of market economics', in *Culture and economy: The shaping of capitalism in Eastern Asia*, ed. Timothy Brook and Hy V. Luong (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 61–77.

5 Kirsten Endres, *Ritual, Fest und Politik in Nordvietnam. Zwischen Ideologie und Tradition* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 2000). Endres' use of this term refers back to Ann Anagnost, 'The politics of ritual displacement', in *Asian visions of authority: Religion and the modern states of East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles Keyes, Helen Hardacre and Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp. 221–54.

6 Ngô Duc Tinh, 'Vietnamese village: Tradition and renovation', *East Asian Present*, 1 (1997): 87–115; Nguyen Tu Chi, 'The traditional Viet village in Bac Bo: Its organizational structure and problems', *Vietnamese Studies*, 61, 1 (1979): 7–119.

as director of the Institute of Folk Culture Studies of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, this social perspective influenced the design of many Vietnamese and foreign research projects and dissertations in the 1990s. Given the variety of explanations, Shaun Malarney's use of the term 'multivocality' in 1993 to explain the alternative meanings ascribed to the work of reconstructing ritual spaces and practice was prescient.⁷

Within Vietnam, a major policy debate has been waged around the recreation and restoration of ritual sites and practices: whether village festivals, regarded as primarily local religious events, are admissible in a socialist state; and whether they should be preserved in 'traditional' form or adapted to modern requirements. These types of questions, both betraying a 'statist' perspective, have revolved around the modern notion of festivals as *lễ hội* – a compound word consisting of the elements *lễ* (ceremony, ritual or rite, and having a religious connotation) and *hội* (association, gathering or festivity, having a secular connotation). The word *lễ hội*, then, is used to denote village festivals, temple festivals and other traditional festivities with a partly profane, partly sacred character.⁸ By extension, this term has more generally been applied to all festivals, from the semi-religious state celebration of the Hùng Kings to the international arts and culture-oriented Festival Huế.

The debate regarding the role and functions of village festivals was initiated by researchers within the Institute of Folk Culture Studies and more or less settled during a conference in Hanoi in 1993, with the result that village festivals were considered legitimate events, as expressions of the cultural identity and the moral basis of the community.⁹ Ngô Đức Thịnh, Lê Hồng Lý, Nguyễn Chí Bền, Tô Ngọc Thanh and others working within the Institute of Folk Culture Studies and the Folk Culture Association carried out research along these lines through the 1990s. Subsequent years have seen an enormous increase in ritual and festival activities; an enhanced sense of their legitimacy, as evident from state support for and media coverage of festivals; and a mushrooming of calendars and other scholarly, educational and public interest publications about rituals and festivals (usually focusing on explanations of their meaning).

The other question was how to preserve or revive festivals. Many contributors to the 1993 conference proposed adapting them to the exigencies of modern life, and especially to tourism, some claiming that the latter aspect has always been part of traditional festivals. Others warned against the consequences of adaptation and tourist development, arguing that the *lễ hội* would lose their symbolic and especially religious significance, thus becoming mere entertainment and mere form.¹⁰ Is this concern about

7 Shaun Malarney, *Culture, ritual and revolution in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); and Malarney, 'Ritual and revolution in Vietnam' (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1993).

8 Lê Văn Kỳ, 'Cơ cấu và việc tổ chức lễ hội' [Structure and organization of festivals], in *Lễ hội cổ truyền của người Việt ở Bắc Bộ Việt Nam* [Ancient festivals of the Viet people in northern Vietnam], ed. Lê Trung Vũ (Hà Nội: Khoa học Xã hội, 1992), pp. 67–98; Nguyễn Duy Hinh, 'Đôi suy nghĩ lý luận về lễ hội' [Some theoretical problems concerning festivals], in *Lễ hội truyền thống trong đời sống xã hội hiện đại* [Traditional folk festivals in modern social life], ed. Đinh Gia Khánh and Lê Hữu Tầng (Hà Nội: Khoa học Xã hội, 1993), pp. 225–32.

9 See the articles in Đinh Gia Khánh and Lê Hữu Tầng, ed. *Lễ hội truyền thống* and Lê Trung Vũ, ed. *Lễ hội cổ truyền*.

10 On the need for adaptation see, for example, Đinh Gia Khánh and Lê Hữu Tầng, ed. *Lễ hội truyền thống*; scholars taking the opposite position included Đặng Nghiễm Vạn and Tô Ngọc Thanh.

form really new, however? Since the sixteenth century, the Vietnamese state has been involved in these rituals through the king's power to invest guardian spirits and the authority of the Ministry of Rites to prescribe ritual activities and endorse hagiographies.¹¹ The royal certificate of investiture (*sắc phong*), the prescription of rites and the endorsement of hagiographies were all attempts by the state to place heterogeneous local ritual within the structures of Confucian orthodoxy. At the same time, royal certificates investing a local personage or historical figure as guardian spirit were eagerly sought as symbolic links between community and state, at times invested with mystical powers of their own.¹²

The Ministry of Rites, long disappeared, has found a worthy guardian of its mission in the Ministry of Culture and Information. Ministry regulations regarding the designation of sites as being of 'historic or cultural significance' have become one of the major avenues through which localities have restored ritual sites and practices, including their annual festivals. However, in a post-modern twist to the dialogic process through which community, scholars and the state reached consensus on the restoration of village festivals, leakage of the term used to describe these events to include national and international events has now infused these events with the semi-sacred context of *lễ hội*. Today, courses on festival management at the Hanoi Culture University are referred to as *lễ hội* management and include everything from local village festivals to case studies of Festival Huế.

Roughly after village and temple festivals had been officially endorsed as contributing to Vietnam's national identity expressed in beautiful traditional values, scholarly interest turned to spirit mediumship – especially in the northern form of *lên đồng* – and to pilgrimage, for instance to the shrine of *Bà Chúa Xứ* – the Lady of the Realm – in the southwestern province of Châu Đốc. Much of the scholarly interest in *lên đồng* focuses on individual or at least small-scale ritual attempts to effect healing and well-being on a personal level.¹³ With the proliferation of mediumship practices and their public acceptance by the party-state and by a large part of the public, *lên đồng*, *hầu bóng* and other types of spirit mediumship become fringe or even integral parts of public, large-scale temple festivals which are transformed into sites of mass pilgrimage.¹⁴ Whereas much of the scholarly attention is oriented towards ritual practice in the northern part of the country, the central and southern regions and the highlands have received much less attention even though ritual, mediumship and pilgrimage are no less prevalent in those regions than in the Red River Delta. The major

11 Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'La conception de la monarchie divine dans le Viet Nam traditionnel', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, 84 (1997): 147–57.

12 During the annual festival in Hành Thiên in Nam Định province, farmers crawl under a royal warrant set on a gilded stand for luck in the coming agricultural season.

13 Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 'The religion of the Four Palaces: Mediumship and therapy in Viet culture' (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2002); and *Possessed by the spirits: Mediumship in contemporary Vietnamese communities*, ed. Karen Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2006).

14 Phạm Quỳnh Phương, 'Hero and deity: Empowerment and contestation in the veneration of Trần Hưng Đạo in contemporary Vietnam' (Ph.D. diss., LaTrobe University, 2005).

exception to this pattern is Philip Taylor's ongoing work in the Mekong Delta, in particular his monograph on the Lady of the Realm.¹⁵

The articles in this collection have not been assembled to neatly reflect this geographic diversity in Vietnam, as most conform to the northern orientation of current scholarship – the only exception being Oscar Salemink's essay on the Festival Huế. Instead, the articles reflect a concern with ritual in terms of scope and level, ranging from individual and family concerns via village and locality to national level and state concerns. Earlier versions of three of the articles in this collection were presented in draft form at the March 2003 conference 'Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind and Spirit' at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.¹⁶ The three remaining articles were invited in order to provide a perspective that ranges from individual to state level practices. While each of the articles is based on case studies in Vietnam, the editors hope that they provide a comparative resource to scholars interested in similar practices within East and Southeast Asia.

Contents of the symposium

The articles have been organised following an assumption that the 'multivocality' described by Malarney could best be understood through scale shifting. Beginning at the individual level, Nguyễn Thị Hiền ('Seats for spirits to sit upon: Becoming spirit mediums in contemporary Vietnam') focuses on personal motivation in the practice of spirit possession (*lên đồng*). *Lên đồng*, like spirit possession rituals elsewhere, is a complex religious and cultural performance which makes the spiritual realm present through theatrical means and dramatic interactions. In Vietnam, this practice is most closely tied to worship of the Mother Goddess (*Đạo Mẫu*). This religion, also known as the Religion of the Four Palaces (Heaven, Earth, Water and Mountain Forests) draws on both ethnic Việt (Kinh) and upland minority beliefs and characters. Hiền breaks with an extensive literature that places the practice of spirit possession within a context of therapy. By allowing mediums to speak for themselves, she concludes that people commit themselves to serve the spirits (*hầu bóng*) first because it is their destiny and second because they expect their practice to bring them good health and auspiciousness. Equally, performing *lên đồng* rituals fulfills the mediums' religious needs, providing them with the social and emotional satisfaction that they can find nowhere else.

Moving from the individual to family and lineage, Kate Jellema ('Everywhere incense burning: The revival of ancestor worship in Renovation-era Vietnam') focuses on the veneration of ancestors as devotion to the ever-present souls of the departed, as a form of self-cultivation, and as a means in intervening in the affairs of the living. She develops and expands on these themes through the spiritual labour of two individuals, Thúy and Sung, both of whom devote a significant part of their money, time and energy to the worship of their ancestors. Thúy, who has never married, nurtures a rich

15 Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the rise: Pilgrimage and popular religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

16 The convenors of that conference were Dr Laurel Kendall (American Museum of Natural History), Prof. Nguyễn Văn Huy (Vietnam Museum of Ethnology) and Prof. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Harvard University).

private relationship with her departed parents, discussing with them the affairs of the living, and pleading with them to intervene on her behalf. Sung, on the other hand, has taken up the restoration of ritual places and practices of his family as a means of re-establishing his geographically wide-ranging lineage.

Taken together, these two case studies remind us not only of the multiple pasts of a Vietnamese family, but also its multiple presents. In the lives of Thúy and Sung, and the family and lineage members whose lives intersect with them, the worship of ancestors – ever present though removed by time – offers a means of maintaining ongoing relationships with loved ones, publicly demonstrating economic success and moral debt, seeking moral guidance and furthering projects of self-cultivation, intervening in the affairs of the living, and building or maintaining lineage and family networks. As companions, meritorious forebears and moral creditors, ancestors remain potent spiritual beings whose efficacious interventions result from an ongoing cycle of nurture and remembrance that binds children to parents and descendants to ancestors long after biological death.

Shifting from lineage to village level, Michael DiGregorio ('Things held in common: Memory, space and the reconstitution of community life') looks at the ritual practices and contestations by which an iron- and steel-producing village in northern Vietnam is understood and indeed (re-)produced as a community. The article describes in vivid ethnographic detail how the search for community against the backdrop of economic competition and cooperation as well as competition between lineages (*giáp*) and between generations in a politicised revolutionary and post-revolutionary context, generates constant contestations over (temporal) claims to origins. The contemporary contestation over who is to be recognised as the founder of the village and of the blacksmithing craft reflects competition between the historical founding lineages in the village. This (historical) contestation is cross-cut by spatial claims over particular sacred sites for the re-construction of temples, shrines and pagodas, on behalf of particular groups and categories of villagers – the most conspicuous being the all-female Buddhist Association, which successfully obtained space for the construction of a new pagoda. Another prominent arena for such contestations is the village History Collection Committee, led by the dominant lineage branch, which according to DiGregorio 'were promoting shared origins and moral obligations not as a cover for inequality, but rather, as a remedy'. In so doing, these elderly people, then, attempt to discursively construe and ritually construct the village as a moral community against perceived threats to community solidarity from the growing market competition within this economically highly successful craft village.

In his contribution 'Praying for profit: The cult of the Lady of the Treasury', Lê Hồng Lý offers a description and analysis of the overnight popularity of this deity. According to legend, the Lady of the Granary (*Bà Chúa Kho*) was worshipped as a Lý-dynasty figure who successfully set up rice granaries in a village in Bắc Ninh province. During colonial times and the socialist heyday, the temple complex and cult dedicated to her suffered a fate similar to that of many other temples in northern Vietnam. As elsewhere, in the 1980s local groups pressured the authorities for permission to rebuild the temple and re-start activities related to the cult, which was granted in January 1989 by a Ministry of Culture and Information decision to designate the complex as a historical and cultural monument. After that, interest in the Lady boomed well beyond

the confines of the locality and beyond farmers' interest in fertility of the soil. Books and pamphlets explaining the cultural significance of the Lady were quickly sold out, the temple complex was restored, religious and ritual activities – including spirit mediumship resembling the practices described by Nguyễn Thị Hiền and Oscar Salemink in this issue – were re-started, and pilgrims started to arrive in great numbers.

This time, however, most worshippers were not farmers but traders. In order to explain this phenomenon, Lý points to the location of the temple close to the main road and railroad linking Hanoi with China, but also to the timing of the boom – not just after the *Đổi Mới* reforms took hold, but after the normalisation of trade relations with China. In his interpretation Lý notes the sense of economic insecurity and moral uncertainty experienced by many pilgrims who attribute their new wealth to luck or even to dishonesty, at a time of market transition characterised by institutional immaturity, when trade and market transactions are seemingly chaotic and unpredictable. Traders try to offset their this-worldly insecurity by engaging in other-worldly transactions with the Lady who is now associated with another meaning of the Vietnamese word '*kho*', namely 'treasury' rather than 'granary'. While the market chaos of the early reforms may explain why traders seek to offset their sense of insecurity by seeking spiritual intervention, it begs the question of what the development of more mature and predictable market institutions will do to the popularity of the Lady of the Treasury.

In 'The emperor's new clothes: Re-fashioning ritual in the Huế Festival', Oscar Salemink shifts his gaze from northern to central Vietnam, from local ritual practice to a localised event with a national and even international scope and from ritual as part of the religious domain to a biennial international arts festival as a largely secular event. He asks the question of how the authorities can successfully claim political credit for the Festival in the absence of public symbols that are easily understandable by the public. Salemink proposes to analyse the Festival Huế – a big modern art festival with local, national and international participation and attendance – as a new ritual, by focusing not on symbolic substance but on 'the cultural *form* of the performance as an artistic genre – a form which through borrowing, cross-over and repetition has become quintessentially Vietnamese, and therefore "authentic", in the eyes of a large part of the audience'. This enables him to develop an argument regarding the formal continuity between 'official' culture and traditional folk culture as a form of aesthetic politics.

By looking at a few key performances and their reception by various audiences – a popular fashion show, a closing ceremony and the hesitant attempts to revive the *Nam Giao* ritual which was historically performed by the emperor on behalf of the nation – and by juxtaposing these vignettes with ritual in action in a section on spirit mediums in Huế, the author argues that these performances use particular cultural forms that allude to the iconography of ritual in Vietnam. Through aesthetic association the effect of the performance is linked to the efficacy of ritual, regardless of the symbolic content. By this focus on recognisable iconographic forms across disciplinary and religious boundaries, the political regime can assume the role of mediator between this world and the 'other world' as in the Confucian court tradition. Observing that the present-day Ministry of Culture and Information hesitantly assumes some of the ritual functions of the pre-colonial Ministry of Rites Salemink claims that Hồ Chí Minh's

‘political “descendants” don the Emperor’s new clothes, even if they hire an actor to stand in and play the Emperor’s part’.

Finally, Shaun Malarney’s article (Festivals and the politics of the exceptional dead in northern Vietnam) jumps another level on the scale by explicitly looking at the role of the state in the ritual celebration of what he calls the ‘exceptional dead’. This concept weds the Weberian notion of charisma to the Vietnamese practice of remembering ancestors – in this case the remembering done, organised or condoned by the socialist state. Malarney sketches in great detail various types of ritualised engagements with charismatic dead as developed by the Vietnamese state, both during the heyday of ‘socialist construction’ and in the *Đổi Mới* era of economic and social reform. He shows that in spite of significant continuities, the resurgence of festivals since the early 1990s also indicates profound changes in official and public definitions and enactments of ritual engagements with the charismatic dead.

While the state has allowed private citizens and groups to openly ritually engage a much wider group of charismatic dead and hence to enlarge the sources of charisma beyond the socialist canon, it has also attempted to control and appropriate such festivals, thus ritually creating political legitimacy from the ritual engagement with an enlarged set of charismatic dead. In particular, state involvement with the Hùng Kings’ death anniversary ceremony in Phú Thọ province demonstrates that state officials are readjusting their preference of, and attitude toward, the charismatic dead with whom they publicly associate. In Malarney’s words, the state continues to ‘ritually employ the charismatic dead as part of its legitimation process, but by changing the dead involved, the state is making different claims regarding the sources of its legitimacy and links to the pre-revolutionary past’. His final conclusion is that while the ritual engagement with charismatic dead remains important as model of virtue, moral guide and source of communal pride or political legitimation, ‘the identities of and way in which people engage the charismatic dead continues to change and will undoubtedly continue to do so as Vietnamese society continues to transform’.

Taken together, the six articles in this special section of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* offer a range of possibilities in which rituals in contemporary Vietnam can be seen as attempts to engage with the dead – ancestors, spirits, deities, charismatic figures – in the *yin* (*âm*) world who continue to influence the living in the *yang* (*đương*) world. Although the scope, scale and level of these ritual engagements differ widely, there is a good deal of overlap and cross-cutting in terms of beliefs, practices and attitudes, suggesting the possibility of a nested hierarchy connecting these ritual practices at various levels. Simultaneously, these papers suggest that despite their ‘traditional’ feel, such rituals keep changing in response to the changing uncertainties and insecurities, desires and anxieties that are part of the human condition. In that sense, the search for ritual form is never definitive or complete, and must remain ‘unfinished business’,¹⁷ reflecting the changing social, economic, political and cultural circumstances in Vietnamese lifeworlds. The Vietnamese capture that realisation of the incompleteness of ritual engagement in their saying ‘*Đương sao âm vậy*’ (However the *yang* world, so is the *yin* world).

17 The Vietnamese noun for work or business, *việc*, can also refer to ritual work or family business.